

Confronting Slavery and Revealing the “Lost Cause”

National Park Service Civil War sites draw millions of visitors each year. Manassas National Battlefield attracts more than a million and Gettysburg National Battlefield attracts almost two million. Clearly, these are important places for Americans. American heritage is bound up in the history told at these sites and visitors often have very definite ideas about the story they expect and want to hear. One of the most sensitive and controversial issues that any Civil War site interpreter will confront is the role of slavery in the South’s decision to secede from and take up arms against the United States. Although an argument that slavery played an important role in the coming of the Civil War would raise few eyebrows among academic scholars, for public historians faced with a popular audience unfamiliar with the latest scholarship on the subject such an assertion can be very controversial. Whenever I speak to groups of Civil War re-enactors, to Civil War Round Tables or at public gatherings about the Civil War, I am reminded that slavery and the war are often separated in the public mind. The Sons of the Confederate Veterans have argued that the Ken Burns PBS series on the Civil War had too much material on slavery. Indeed, in Gettysburg’s permanent exhibition, neither slavery nor slaves are mentioned in regard to the war. After the *Civil War News* published a portion of a lecture given by John Latschar, the superintendent at Gettysburg, that suggested that the war may have been fought over slavery, the Southern Heritage Coalition condemned his words and 1,100 post cards calling for his immediate removal flooded the Office of the Secretary of the Interior.

Obviously, most would not be moved to this response, nor are the majority of visitors to Civil War battlefields so acutely sensitive on this issue. Yet, there is no doubt that Latschar’s comments struck a nerve among many who wished to minimize or deny the connection between slavery and the Civil War. As historian James McPherson explained in a recent article, it is especially difficult for southern whites “to admit—that the noble Cause for which their ancestors fought might have included the defense of slavery.” Yet, the best historical scholars over the last generation or more

have argued convincingly for the centrality of slavery among the causes of the Civil War.¹ The evidence for such arguments provided in the letters, speeches, and articles written by those who established and supported the Confederacy is overwhelming and difficult to deny. While slavery was not the only cause for which the South fought during the Civil War, the testimony of Confederate leaders and their supporters makes it very clear that slavery was central to the motivation for secession and war. When southern whites in the 19th century spoke of the “southern way of life” for which they fought, they referred to a way of life founded on white supremacy and supported by the institution of slavery. Even a cursory exploration of the primary sources they left makes this point.²

In mid-January of 1861, delegates gathered in Milledgeville in central Georgia to consider a course of action in response to the recent election of a Republican President. For more than a decade political debate had raged throughout the South about the threat posed by what Joseph E. Brown, “the ploughboy” governor from Northern Georgia, termed, the northern “fanatical abolitionist sentiment.” To Brown, the election was not simply about a new President taking office. It was about something far more threatening to the future of the South’s fundamental economic institution that had shaped southern culture and the social relations in that region for more than 200 years. In the *Federal Union*, a Milledgeville weekly, Brown argued that Lincoln was “the mere instrument of a great triumphant party, the principles of which are deadly hostile to the institution of slavery.”³ The convention vote went convincingly for secession (208 to 89 with six delegates refusing to sign the secession ordinance), and the decision turned on the need to protect slavery. One Georgia editor confirmed what most white Georgians and most white southerners believed when he wrote in 1862, “[N]egro slavery is the South, and the South is [N]egro slavery.”⁴

Georgia was not the first slaveholding state to secede from the United States in the wake of Lincoln’s election. South Carolina had led the way almost a month before when its Charleston convention, held just before Christmas in 1860, declared that the “Union heretofore existing between the State of South Carolina and the other States of North America is dissolved...” The reason for this

drastic action, South Carolina delegates explained in their “Declaration of the Causes which Induced the Secession of South Carolina,” was what they termed a broken compact between the federal government and “the slaveholding states.” It was the actions of what delegates referred to as “the non-slaveholding states” who refused to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that was the specific example used as evidence for this argument. “In many of these States the fugitive [slave] is discharged from the service of labor claimed...[and] In the State of New York even the right of transit for a slave has been denied....” The delegation made clear that the election of Abraham Lincoln in the fall of 1860 as “President of the United States whose opinions and purposes are hostile to Slavery” was the final straw. In the South Carolinian mind the coming of Republican political power signaled, in the words of the convention, “that a war [would] be waged against slavery until it shall cease throughout the United States.”⁵

The editors at the *Charleston Mercury* agreed. They had anticipated the threat that a Republican victory would pose when in early November they warned South Carolinians and the entire South that “[t]he issue before the country is the extinction of slavery.” “No man of common sense, who has observed the progress of events, and is not prepared to surrender the institution,” they charged, “can doubt that the time for action has come—now or never.” The newspaper editors, like most southerners saw Lincoln’s election as lifting abolitionists to power, and like most southerners they understood, as they plainly stated, that “[t]he existence of slavery is at stake.”⁶ They called for a convention to consider secession because they saw such action as the only way to protect slavery. When the South Carolina convention did meet little more than a month later, it dealt almost entirely with issues related directly to slavery. It did not complain about tariff rates, competing economic systems or mistreatment at the hands of northern industrialists. The South was not leaving the United States because of the power of northern economic elites who in reality, as historian Bruce Levine observed, “feared alienating the slave owners more than they disliked slavery.”⁷ The secession of South Carolina, approved by the convention 169 votes to none, was about the preservation of slavery.

At the time of secession virtually everyone understood that slavery was the major factor in the coming hostilities. Alabama’s Robert Hardy Smith, elected to the Provisional Confederate States Congress, understood this only too well and said so publicly. The *Mobile Daily Register* printed the speech he gave at Temperance Hall in March of 1861. “The question of [N]egro slavery has been

the apple of discord in the government of the United States since its foundation,” he told his audience. Slavery remained the central divisive issue, he believed, the issue over which the Union had been broken. “We have dissolved the late Union,” he argued, “chiefly because of the [N]egro quarrel.”⁸

Alexander Stephens of Georgia also understood what the South was fighting for. A decade before secession, in reaction to the debate over the Compromise of 1850, he wrote to his brother Linton citing “the great question of the permanence of slavery in the Southern States” as crucial for maintaining the union. “[T]he crisis of that question,” he predicted, “is not far ahead.”⁹ After the war he would become more equivocal, but in the heat of the secession debate in the spring of 1861 Stephens spoke as directly as he had in 1850. On March 21, 1861 in Savannah, Stephens, then Vice President of the Confederacy, drew applause when he proclaimed that “our new government” was founded on slavery, “its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests upon the great truth, that the [N]egro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—submission to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.”¹⁰

Mississippi’s Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, was more cautious about declaring slavery as the pivotal issue. When he did address the issue, he generally did so within the context of constitutional guarantees of property rights. Yet, there was not doubt that the property rights he sought most to guarantee in 1861 protected slavery. He was sure that under Republican rule “property in slaves [would become] so insecure as to be comparatively worthless...”¹¹ A large slaveholder, Davis was concerned about the economics of abolition, but as an experienced politician he also worried that an overtly pro-slavery stand might alienate potential European allies and split the southern population. After all, by 1861 only about one third of southern families in the 11 seceding states held slaves and the non-slaveholders always posed a potential problem for Confederate unity. Even some historians who see slavery as the major cause of southern secession are not completely convinced that the one million southern men who fought for the Confederacy, the vast majority of whom had never owned even one slave, would have been willing to die for slavery.¹² Significantly, secession sentiment was strongest in states, and in regions within states, where slaveholding was concentrated. Conversely, union loyalty was strongest in Piedmont regions and other areas of the South where non-slaveholders held sway. The *Charleston*

Mercury charged that the upper South, less dependent on slave labor, was suspect on the question of slavery because “with them [the upper South states] slavery, or its abolition, is a question of mere expediency.... To us the institution is vital and indispensable. We must maintain ourselves in this struggle or be utterly destroyed.”¹³

Many slaveholders were equally skeptical that non-slaveholders would support slaveholding with their lives. Thus, secessionists mounted a formidable campaign to convince non-slaveholders that they had a critical stake in the slave system. Jabez Lamar Monroe Curry, secessionist from Alabama who served in the Confederate Congress and helped to draft the Confederate Constitution, spoke directly to the non-slaveholding majority in the South when he argued that those who contended that “non-slaveholders are not interested in the institution of slavery,” were absolutely wrong. “No greater or more mischievous mistake could be made,” he claimed and then set about to prove his point by arguing that slavery encouraged a society that privileged all white people, non-slaveholders and slaveholders alike. Indeed, he argued that abolition would place poor whites at the bottom of southern society, on a level with black southerners. Under these circumstances Curry believed “the poor whites of the South are more interested in the institution than any other portion of the community.”¹⁴

The *Kentucky Statesman* in Lexington warned its readers about the dangers of allowing a split between slaveholders and non-slaveholders that the newspaper contended was “[t]he great lever by which abolitionists hoped to extirpate slavery in the States....” Southerners must be careful not to fall victim to propaganda that sought to raise suspicions that non-slaveholders would not stand for slavery, for as the newspaper argued, “[t]he strongest pro-slavery men in this State are those who do not own one dollar of slave property.” Doubters were urged to travel to the mountainous regions of the state where, the newspaper argued, they would find “thousands of as true Southern men as tread the soil of the cotton States, yet comparatively few own slaves.” Significantly, “pro-slavery men” were equated with “true Southern men,” for slavery was the essence of the southern society and the newspaper contended that slaveowners and non-slaveowners alike “believe that slavery to be right and socially beneficial.” “The interest felt by the non-slaveholders of the South in this question is not prompted by dollars and cents, but by a loyalty to the foundation of the southern way of life.”¹⁵

A special edition of the *Louisville Daily Courier* was more detailed and more direct in its message to non-slaveholders. The abolition of slav-

ery would raise African Americans to “the level of the white race,” and the poorest whites would be closest to the former slaves in both social and physical distance. Then came the most penetrating questions that cut to the core of racial fears. “Do they wish to send their children to schools in which the [N]egro children of the vicinity are taught? Do they wish to give the [N]egro the right to appear in the witness box to testify against them?” Then the article moved to the final and most emotionally-charged question of all. Would the non-slaveholders of the South be content to live with what the writer contended was the ultimate end of abolition, to “AMALGAMATE TOGETHER THE TWO RACES IN VIOLATION OF GOD’S WILL.” The conclusion was inevitable the article argued; non-slaveholders had much at stake in the maintenance of slavery and everything to lose by its abolition. African-American slavery was the only thing that stood between poor whites and the bottom of southern society where they would be forced to compete with and live among black people.¹⁶

These arguments were extremely effective as even the poorest white southerners got the message. Their interest in slavery was far more important than simple economics. As one southern prisoner explained to his Wisconsin-born guard “you Yanks want us to marry our daughters to niggers.”¹⁷ This fear of a loss of racial status was common. A poor white farmer from North Carolina explained that he would never stop fighting because what he considered to be an abolitionist federal government was “trying to force us to live as the colored race.” Although he had grown tired of the war, a Confederate artilleryman from Louisiana agreed that he must continue to fight. An end to slavery would bring what he considered horrific consequences, for he would “never want to see the day when a [N]egro is put on an equality with a white person.” These non-slaveholders surely recognized their stake in the institution of slavery and thus in the war. Most Confederates would have agreed with the assessment of the southern cause set forth by a U.S. soldier in 1863, shortly after the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation. “I know enough about the southern spirit,” he said, “that I think they will fight for the institution of slavery even to extermination.”¹⁸

James McPherson’s study of letters and diaries written by Civil War soldiers provides many examples of white yeoman farmers turned soldiers who were determined to fight rather than “see the day when a [N]egro is put on an equality with a white person.” Although McPherson found that most Confederate soldiers wrote little about slavery, he argued that the defense of slavery was a

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major part of their motivation. After a close analysis of hundreds of letters he concluded that virtually all southern soldiers “took slavery for granted as part of the southern way of life for which they fought and did not feel compelled to discuss it.” Apparently, Jefferson Davis had little to worry about, at least in the early years of the war. White southerners at all economic levels saw their fight as for their own liberty and place in southern society and for slavery “one and inseparable.” As one infantryman put it, “[w]e are fighting for our liberty, against the North...who are determined to destroy slavery.” Fears of the consequences of abolition fostered white solidarity, forming the load-bearing pillar in the foundation of Confederate nationhood.¹⁹

Although the defense of slavery was central to the Confederacy, the abolition of slavery was not initially the official goal of the United States or the primary concern of most of the American people. As the most respected historians of our generation have shown, Lincoln and the vast majority of Republicans sought only to limit the expansion of slavery. Most who supported this “free soil” program that would maintain the western territories for free labor, did so out of self-interest. To urban or farm workers or to northern small farmer owners, Republicans offered the possibility of cheap land devoid of competition from slave labor or even from free blacks, who faced restriction in western settlement. “Vote yourself a Farm,” was the not-so-subtle Republican message to white laboring men with the understanding that the western territories, having undergone Indian removal in the 1830s and 1840s, would be racially homogeneous.²⁰

Abolitionists, black and white, sincerely sought the end to slavery and accepted its geographical limitation as a step toward its inevitable demise. But although most whites in the North wanted to restrict slavery’s spread, they would not have gone to war in 1861 to end it. President Lincoln understood his constituency very well and his statements on slavery were calculated to reassure white northerners as well as southern slaveholders that the U.S. government had, in his words, “no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with slavery in the States where it exists.”²¹ Indeed, Lincoln even reluctantly agreed to accept an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would have protected slavery in those states where it existed. Ohio, Maryland, and Illinois actually ratified this measure that, ironically, would have been the 13th Amendment.²² Although this may have played well among northerners who were willing to concede protection to slavery so long as it remained in the South, slaveholders understood only too well it was not that simple.

Since most Americans saw the West as the place that would provide the vitality of national progress, to deny slaveholders access to that territory was to deny them access to America’s future. Southerners took such restrictions as a direct affront to their regional honor and a threat to their social and economic survival. Georgia secessionist Robert Toombs put it succinctly: “we must expand or perish.”²³ Lincoln did not have to explain that slavery had no place in the nation’s future, the South was well aware that in order to save their institution of bondage they must leave the United States and that is precisely what their secession movement was calculated to do.

Thus, while northerners claimed that they meant only to restrict slavery’s expansion, southerners were convinced that to restrict slavery was to constrict its life blood. This war was not about tariffs or differences in economic systems or even about state’s rights, except for the right of southern states to protect slavery. Had the South been truly committed to the doctrine of state’s rights they could never have supported the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. This federal law invalidated state Personal Liberty Laws in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere in the North that prohibited state officials or property from being used in the capture and return of a fugitive slave. Clearly the South was selective in its state’s rights advocacy. It was not willing to stand for state’s rights except to preserve its institution of slavery where it existed and where it must expand. Some southerners had argued in the 1850s for the annexation of Cuba, one of only two other remaining slave societies in the western hemisphere, as one plan for slavery’s expansion. Others looked to Mexico and Latin America, but always it was about saving and inflating slavery. And while the U.S. government may not have gone to war to abolish slavery in the South, it did go to war to save the union from what it increasingly came to believe was a “slave power conspiracy” to restrict citizen liberties and finally to destroy the United States to protect slavery. U.S. determination to contain slavery in the South and to prevent its spread into the western territories was a part of the effort to preserve civil rights and free labor in the nation’s future. The South was willing to destroy the union to protect slavery. It could not allow slavery’s containment for, from the slaveholder’s point of view, to disallow slavery’s expansion was to ultimately bring about its extinction.

Lincoln’s issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 transformed the war into a holy crusade, but there was always disagreement among U.S. troops about outright abolition. Yet, increasingly after 1863, “pro-emancipation conviction did predominate among the leaders and fight-

ing soldiers of the Union Army.”²⁴ Regardless of whether U.S. troops fought to limit or to abolish it, however, slavery was the issue that focused their fight, just as it did for the Confederacy. A half-century after serving the Confederate cause, John Singleton Mosby, legendary leader of Mosby’s Rangers, offered no apologies for his southern loyalties. He was quite candid about his reason for fighting. “The South went to war on account of slavery,” he said. “South Carolina went to war—as she said in her secession proclamation—because slavery w[oul]d not be secure under Lincoln.” Then he added as if to dispel all doubt, “South Carolina ought to know what was the cause of her seceding.”²⁵

Of course, Mosby was right. South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and the other states that seceded from the United States did know the reason for their action and they stated it clearly, time and time again. They named the preservation of slavery as foremost among their motivations. When such a wide variety of southerners—from private citizens, to top governmental officials, from low ranking enlisted men to Confederate military leaders at the highest levels, from local politicians to regional newspaper editors—all agree, what more evidence do we need? The question for Americans at the end of the 20th century is, “when will we accept their explanation?”

Notes

- 1 James McPherson, “The Heart of the Matter,” *New York Review of Books*, (October 23, 1997), 35-36, 46-47. In addition to the books reviewed by McPherson, see Bruce Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free: The Roots of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992) and David Blight, “They Knew What Time It Was,” in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Why the Civil War Came* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 51-77.
- 2 The interesting question for the serious scholar of American social and cultural history is why, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, some Americans continue to believe that slavery was not an important cause of the war.
- 3 “Joseph E. Brown’s Secessionist Public Letter, December 7, from Milledgeville,” William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, eds., *Secession Debated: Georgia’s Showdown in 1860*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 147. Reprinted from, (*The Milledgeville Weekly*) *Federal Union*, December 11, 1860.
- 4 Quoted in Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge; Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 60.
- 5 “Declaration of the Causes Which Induced the Secession of South Carolina,” reprinted in Edwin C.

Rozwenc and Wanye A. Frederick, *Slavery and the Breakdown of the American Consensus* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1964), 42-47.

- 6 “What Shall the South Carolina Legislature Do?,” *The Charleston Mercury*, November 3, 1860.
- 7 Levine, *Half Slave and Half Free*, 229.
- 8 “An Address to the Citizens of Alabama, on the Constitution and Laws of the Confederate States of America,...at Temperance Hall, on the 30th of March, 1861,” *Mobile Daily Register*, 1861, reprinted in Jon L. Wakelyn, ed., *Southern Pamphlets on Secession, November 1860-April 1861* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 207-209.
- 9 William L. Barney, *The Road to Secession: A New Perspective on the Old South* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), 121.
- 10 *Augusta Daily Constitutionalist*, March 30, 1861, in the Gilder Lehrman Collection, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, NY.
- 11 Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Jefferson Davis: Constitutionalist; His Letters, Papers and Speeches* 10 Vols, (Jackson, Miss.: Little & Ives Company, 1923), IV, 357.
- 12 William C. Davis, *The Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996). William Davis is convinced that slavery was the cause of secession but was not the thing for which Confederates fought.
- 13 Barney, *The Road to Secession*, 185.
- 14 Wakelyn, ed., *Southern Pamphlets, Jabez Lamar Monroe Curry*, “The Perils and Duty of the South” Speech Delivered in Talladega, Alabama, November 26, 1860,44.
- 15 *The Kentucky Statesman*, October 5, 1869.
- 16 *Louisville Daily Courier*, July 27, 1861, in the Gilder Lehrman Collection, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, NY.
- 17 quoted in James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994) 53.
- 18 quoted in James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought In The Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 108-109. This study provides overwhelming testimony from Confederate soldiers who cited the preservation of slavery as a primary concern of their service to the South.
- 19 McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 54; 51.
- 20 See for example, Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), or James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and*

Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²¹ quoted in James McPherson, *Drawn With the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1996), 62.

²² This amendment was passed in the U.S. Congress. Events of March 1861 had moved too far and were advancing too fast for such an amendment to move to completion.

²³ Speech delivered by Robert Toombs, November 13, 1860, Milledgeville, Georgia, reprinted in Freehling and Simpson, eds., *Secession Debate*, 40.

²⁴ McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 64

²⁵ "John Singleton Mosby to Samuel Chapman," Washington, D.C., June 20, 1907 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, New York, New York).

James Oliver Horton is the Benjamin Banneker Professor of American Studies at George Washington University and Director of the African American Communities Project of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian. He is the chair of the National Park Service Advisory Board.

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Karen Byrne

The Remarkable Legacy of Selina Gray

Emma Gray Syphax, left and Sarah Gray Wilson, Selina Gray's daughters, assisted the U.S. Army with the restoration of Arlington House.

Among early preservationists, Selina Gray stands out as a unique and remarkable individual; yet, her name is nowhere to be found in the annals of the historic preservation movement. That Selina did not fit the prototype of the early stewards of the nation's past in no way diminishes the importance of her contributions. In fact, it is her very dissimilarity from traditional 19th-century preservationists that makes Selina's story so compelling.

Selina Gray was one of the many slaves owned by George Washington Parke Custis. Raised at Mount Vernon, Custis was Martha Washington's grandson and the adopted son of George Washington. When Washington died in 1799, Custis inherited and purchased many of the President's possessions. After he left Mount Vernon, Custis needed a proper place to exhibit his "Washington treasury." In 1802, he finished the first wing of his new home, Arlington House.

Construction continued for another 16 years. Custis intended the house to be far more than a private home for his family. The building served as a shrine to George Washington, which made Arlington House one of the nation's earliest memorials. On display was the "Washington treasury," which included portraits, china, furniture, and even the President's war tents. Custis welcomed all visitors who wanted to view his collection of mem-



orabilia, and thus Arlington also functioned as an early American museum.

Much of the day-to-day care of Custis' "treasury" fell to his slaves. The first generation of Arlington slaves belonged to Martha Washington and had come from Mount Vernon. They remembered and took pride in their service to and affiliation with the Washingtons. This heritage, as well as the daily responsibility for the upkeep of the Washington relics, made a significant impression on the succeeding generation of slaves, particularly Selina Gray.

The daughter of Sally and Leonard Norris, Selina was born and raised on the Arlington estate. She, as well as the other slaves, received a rudimentary education from the Custis family. From the time she was old enough to work, Selina probably trained as a house servant. Thus, from an early age, Selina was steeped in Washington apotheosis.

At least some of Custis' slaves attended one of the most important events ever to occur at Arlington. In 1831, Custis' only child, Mary Anna Randolph Custis, married Robert E. Lee, a young army lieutenant. Although no one knew it at the time, Lee's connection to the family would one day cost them their ancestral home as well as the Washington treasury.